



On a Wyoming
Indian reservation,
wild horses
and troubled souls
find peace
through a
charismatic
man in a
wheelchair.

Quiet Calling
After a nearly fatal
accident, Stanford
Addison discovered
his healing gift.



The Gentler

BY LISA JONES
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDY ANDERSON



The day I met Stanford Addison, I sat with him outside his corral watching the horse inside it try to escape. First she got down on her belly like a cat and tried to crawl under the pole fence. Then she snaked her head between the upper poles and pressed her chest against them in an unsuccessful

attempt to push the whole thing over. Then she ran around and around, squealing her disapproval of her new surroundings. Until the day before, she had spent her entire three years of life on the open range.

After a few laps, she stopped in front of Stanford. He sat in the wheelchair he had occupied for 23 years, letting the mare's skidding hooves throw up a small hurricane of dust onto his long black braid, his half-toned, half-atrophied arms, and his slack legs. He squinted up through the fence. The mare tossed her head and whinnied, rolling her eyes piteously. I didn't know much about horses, but it struck me as strange that she would make a point of stopping right there in front of Stanford. She tossed and whinnied in what started to look to me like an appeal. Stanford watched until he was certain she was finished. Then he said in a low voice, "I can't save you."

Calming Presence
Addison teaches visitors his low-key way to break horses.



Breaking Point
Wild horses circle
Addison's corral, and
writer Lisa Jones
tries to tame one.



The thing is, not only horses get broken around here. Everything does, starting with the ground itself. Millions of years ago, a new mountain range broke through the Ancestral Rocky Mountains, leaving the broken remains leaning against the flanks of the Wind River Range and the other mountain chains that comprise the modern-day Rockies. In 1878, at the end of the Indian wars, the Northern Arapaho people arrived at the upthrust of the Range in their own state of brokenness, defeated and hungry.

And then there was Stanford. A car accident had smashed his spine and left him on a slab in the morgue. He had revived to learn that he would spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair. Along with his physical paralysis had come some powerful healing gifts. At first both his disability and these gifts seemed a terrible burden, but he came to understand that he had emerged from a small life into a big one. He had broken, broken through, broken out. His body was changed forever, but so was his heart. This happened in different ways to a lot of people around Stanford. I had no idea, that first time I visited him and watched his curious dialogue with the mare, that the same thing would happen to me.

THE WIND STARTED as I neared the border. It punched through the open car window. I licked my lips and watched Colorado's piney foothills flatten out into yellow undulations of Wyoming prairie, free of every visible life-form except sagebrush, a pair of crows cruising the air currents, and scattered antelope.

I was nervous. *Smithsonian* magazine was sending me to the Wind River Indian Reservation to write a profile of a quadriplegic Northern Arapaho reputed to be able to talk rank beginners through the process of breaking horses. I had approached the magazine's editors with the idea, but now that I had the assignment, I wasn't sure I could pull it off. Here I was, 42 years old, and I was terrified of horses. Worse, in 17 years of working as a journalist in the rural West—17 years spent winning the trust of police chiefs and geneticists and forest rangers and farm workers—I had never won the trust or friendship of a single American Indian. And now one was the subject of my story.

The six of us arrived at Stanford's around midnight under a sky littered with stars. Climbing out of our Subarus and Toyotas, we rolled out our sleeping bags in a pair of teepees he had

had erected for us. It was much colder here than it had been at home. The next morning, we got up, sniffed the dry, hay-scented air, and congregated around a rickety table to eat our cereal. We stared at the hulking, glaciated mountains, brewed coffee on a Coleman stove, and waited for our teacher to emerge from his house.

Eventually, the battered front door opened and Stanford rolled out in his electric wheelchair. He passed beneath the front porch light dangling from a single wire and glided down the wooden ramp. He leaned back, his head resting on a padded brace, his body bouncing passively every time his chair hit a rough spot. As he got closer, my gaze skittered to the dirt beneath the wheels, to the sky above his head, to anywhere else, and irresistibly back to him. His motionless feet were covered in bright white ankle socks that had clearly never touched the ground. His legs protruded, sticklike, from nylon shorts. Acne scars



Born Free On the impoverished Wind River Reservation, horses often run wild.

dotted his shoulders. His arms tapered to long, graceful hands. His face was pockmarked and thin. I had never seen bad luck heaped so hugely upon a human body. I was bristling with discomfort. He wasn't. He looked at me, his gaze mild, open, alert, and unblinking. It walloped

me just the way beauty would. I blushed to the roots of my hair. It felt like he could see every little place in me that had gone hard and rigid.

My eyes searched hungrily for something else to look at and seized on the corral and the horses. Mostly young

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Arabians, they were rounded up just yesterday. They swooped and turned in the corral, as restive and beautiful as caged birds.

Stanford owns these horses, but like many of his neighbors he doesn't have the money to fence, feed, and water them year round. So the horses run free on open range that Stanford pays the tribe to use, and in the summer they are rounded up and those that are old enough are trained. When the weather cools off, Stanford keeps a few in the corral to be ridden by family members or to be sold or traded for other horses. The rest roam the reservation's open range until the next summer.

STANFORD BUMPED OFF toward them and pulled up in a square of shade. We started pulling up lawn chairs nearby. Stanford usually had local Arapaho kids work the horses in his little round corral, but this was an organized clinic for outsiders; it would last four days. I'd been told that participants took turns entering the corral with a horse and—this was the part that boggled my mind—often within a few hours, ride it around the corral. Two of our number were bona fide horsewomen. The rest had come mostly to watch and to be around Stanford.

"I'm not here to ride," I blurted to Stanford. "I had a bad time with a pony when I was little."

"OK," he said.

We were joined by half a dozen Arapaho kids—boys in baggy gangsta jeans and girls in basketball shorts and white T-shirts. I thought Stanford would shoo them away, expecting he'd need everyone to be quiet while he worked. But he didn't. The kids fanned out and perched like a flock of sparrows on corral poles, watching the action. Stanford joked with them, fielded calls on a cord-

less phone, and directed the goings-on in the corral. His presence was large and still and accessible, and I was suddenly, fabulously, at ease.

Paula McCaslin, a steady woman with clear blue eyes and dark hair, stood outside the ring watching the light gray 3-year-old. The mare had led her Arapaho pursuers on a 30-mile chase the day before, and her night in captivity hadn't changed her attitude much. She lunged with the flexibility and passion of a carnivore for the window of air that would lead her back to her known world, away from the two-leggeds with their strong smell and scary eyes, which, like the eyes of all predators, were located on the fronts of their faces. God only knew what would happen now that her main defense—the ability to run fast in a straight line—had been diminished into running in little circles within a confounding wooden structure, the faces she was trying to escape reappearing every few seconds.

Quiet and still, Paula stood next to Stanford outside the corral, watching the mare. She was a 39-year-old government cartographer who had grown up with horses in suburban Denver. She had attended a demonstration Stanford had given in Boulder, Colorado, and come to Wyoming for more. This morning she had eaten her breakfast alone in her parked car, staring straight ahead while the rest of us chatted and sipped coffee.

It was time to start. Paula scootched through the corral rails, joining the mare inside.

"Make her run," Stanford said.

"Yah!" Paula hollered. "Yah!"

The mare startled and broke into a trot. After many laps she stopped, looking at Paula with her ears pricked forward.

"That's the kind of look you want,"

Stanford said. "When she's ready to com-

municate, she’s going to drop her head.” Sure enough, the mare’s head went down. But when Paula approached, the mare turned away.

“OK, make her run,” said Stanford. As the horse swung into a trot, he said, “I’m making it so the horse can only rest when she’s paying attention to Paula.” He was satisfied with the mare’s progress. “She’s seeing that Paula’s not in there to hurt her or threaten her,” he said. “And she’s a smart horse, too; she’s in there thinking.”

I looked at the mare’s still brown eyes. I could see what he meant. Within an hour, Paula was stroking her. It seemed as if the horse were shedding wildness like a tight shoe she’d always wanted to take off.

Paula put a halter on the mare and secured it with a rope to an overhead pulley apparatus. The rope holding the mare had no slack; she could stand comfortably only when she was directly below it. Stanford had us all leave the

corral so she wouldn’t associate people with this elemental lesson: The only way to endure confinement is to accept it. Stanford called it “finding your center.” After an hour of tossing her head and trotting in place with her head in all kinds of awkward positions, the mare calmed down and stood still, as serene and eager as a show horse.

That lovely girl, I thought. *That angel*. Paula “tarped” the mare, tossing a strip of blue tarp tied to a pole across her hindquarters, back, neck, and head. It would get the mare used to human movement and noise. Then, slowly, Paula took a saddle blanket, throwing it gently over the mare’s back and taking it off several times from both sides before saddling and bridling her. Within three hours of entering the corral, Paula mounted the mare, who stood still and blinked, looking surprised at her rapid change in fortune.

I couldn’t believe my eyes. I was amazed by how quickly the mare had

started to trust Paula, and how clearly she *wanted* to do so. Paula hadn’t been aggressive with the mare, and her gentleness had been repaid in kind. Every license plate in this state depicts the silhouette of a horse with its head down, legs flying, and rider leaning back toward the horse’s heaven-bound butt in an effort to stay mounted. This is the Cowboy State, but what I’d just witnessed had been no rodeo. It had unfolded like a love scene or a ballet. The mare had not seemed to take any solace in the fact that she weighed many times what Paula did, or that she was far faster and stronger. She knew a predator when she saw one and simply wanted to know what to do to survive.

MY OWN EQUESTRIAN HISTORY bore no resemblance to what I had just seen. When I was about 5, my older sister and I decided that ponies were the center of the universe. We became ponies, jumping over stumps in the forest, whinnying

and stamping all through the backyard, down the driveway, and along the road. Later, we humbly bowed our heads to receive the invisible Olympic medals we awarded each other: gold for my sister, silver for me. At bedtime we read about horses. We thought the best book ever written was *Jill Enjoys Her Ponies*.

All this happiness came to an abrupt halt when I was 7 and our parents bought us a living, breathing pony. Bobby was 4 years old, with a dirty white coat, the build of a soccer ball, and the soul of Charles Manson. He had a particular affinity for a holly tree into whose low-hanging, spiky-leaved foliage he deposited us with enough regularity that I still have dreams about it. When I was 9, we sold him back to the man we’d bought him from. Since then I had ridden half a dozen times—always on the oldest, gauntest, safest horse I could find. To me, horses could be conniving and dangerous. But then again, they were also the most beautiful creatures on earth.

Here at Stanford’s corral, one gray mare, at least, wanted peace. Excited by the possibility that I’d been all wrong about horses, I put my notebook in the dust under my folding chair, counted to three, and asked Stanford if I could break a horse, too.

“Sure,” he said.

I walked into the holding corral, Stanford rolling alongside me in his chair. I’d been told that he was a spiritual healer who held sweat lodges twice a week, so I half expected some piercing shamanistic insight on which horse I should choose.

“Which one do you want?” was all he asked.

I pointed to a black stallion who was inseparable from a brown and white pinto. They moved together, running straight at the corral fence and then swooping to one side when it proved once again that it wasn’t going to move out of their way. I picked the black stallion because he was beautiful, with fine limbs and a perfect white star on his forehead. I also picked him because he was, as wild stallions go, small.

Some Arapaho boys ran into the holding corral, separating him from his pinto pal and scaring him through the gate into the round corral. I slid through the poles of the fence, not quite able to take a full breath. My horsebreaking career had begun.

I cracked the nylon lead rope to make him run around the corral, and he sauntered over to the fence, put his head

through the poles, and whinnied to his pinto friend, who practically shrieked back. The stallion could read my past perfectly. His disrespect for me was total. I didn’t have the nerve to do what I’ve seen the Arapaho kids do—simply walk up to the horse’s butt and push it until it started moving.

Stanford was quiet until the horse presented me with his gleaming hind-

quarters for approximately the 27th time. “You’re being too accommodating with him,” he said.

“Of course I’m being too accommodat-ing!” I barked back, embarrassed. “He’s a wild stallion!”

“Still, you’re being too accommodating,” he said, dragging on a cigarette from one of the two packs of Kool Filter Kings he would smoke that day.

“I’m an American woman!” I blurted. “We’re taught to be this way!”

My half-joke failed miserably. Stanford sat silent. I tried again to get the horse trotting and failed. I looked to Stanford, but he was on the phone, his back to me.

Hey, buddy, I thought miserably. *I could freaking die out here.*

Boulderites with water bottles, Arapa-hos with cigarettes—maybe 15 people

in all—watched from outside the cor-al. The horse walked, stopped, and occasionally broke into a desultory trot. I waved my arms at him, yelped, and wished the ground would open and swallow me whole. The Boulderites looked sympathetic. The Arapahos laughed. The little boys on the corral fence shouted, “Just git on him!”

“He’s training you to run,” said Stanford, who had ended his phone call.

I wished Stanford, or the horse, or I, would drop dead. “I’m scared,” I rasped back, fear and anger catching in my throat.

Stanford sat, imperturbable. At last he spoke. “You’ll do OK,” he said.

AT THE SIDE of the corral sat a rangy, silver-haired woman named Jeannie Ash. She had moved from rural Nevada to Boulder after a car accident ended her 30-year career training horses. After watching me flail for about an hour, she stood up with an air of grave finality.

“Yeah, let Jeannie give it a try,” Stanford said softly.

Jeannie wiped her hands on her jeans, climbed through the fence, drew herself to her full 5-feet-11 height, and slapped the ground with the lead rope as if she were Zeus and the rope her lightning bolt. All of us, including the stallion, jumped a little bit. I hurried to the side of the corral and hoisted myself onto the pole fence. Jeannie whacked the horse over the butt with the rope, and he stepped into a fine, sustained trot. Within a few minutes he was looking at Jeannie, ears pricked forward with anticipation while she stroked his nose.

“Your turn,” said Stan.

Damn.

I climbed into the corral. The stallion seemed to regard me with considerably less enthusiasm than he had Jeannie, but he let me stroke the gleaming, bony length of his face. Miraculously, I man-aged to put the halter on without drop-ping it. We adjourned for the night, and I fell into an exhausted sleep.

The next day I woke up with the con-viction that if persistence was all I had

going for me, then by God I was going to persist. And I remembered something from white-water kayaking, a sport I’d practiced and loved for years: To begin a scary task is to be close to finishing it. In fact, beginning takes more courage than anything else, because once you make contact with the forces of nature, your most practical and clear-eyed self emerges.

In the corral, the stallion let me stroke him, lean against him, and even jump up and lie over his bare back, my arms on one side and my legs on the other.

Stanford’s directions took on the repet-itive nature of a chant. “Do it again,” he said every time the stallion flinched or spun. “Get back on,” he said every time I slithered off.

The sun climbed in the sky. The heat ticked through the dust. Someone mentioned that the temperature was 97. After I had hoisted myself onto the stallion’s back time after time, my arms felt like limp noodles. All my worries and internal arguments bled away. I felt disembodied, calm, unencumbered by free will.

Slowly, I put a saddle blanket and a saddle on the horse.

“Mount him,” said Stanford.

At my zombie’s pace, I did, settling in the saddle. I inhaled. I exhaled. Then the stallion flicked his ears back, and the next thing I knew, I was standing in the dirt, the horse on his back kicking around below me like an overturned turtle, and I was pointing to his writhing form and announcing, “I’m not afraid of you anymore.”

“You looked like the bionic woman!” Stanford yelled excitedly. “That was cool!”

I registered that his tone of voice had changed from the gentle monotone he had used since we began, and as the stallion scrambled to his feet, I walked over to Stanford and Jeannie. They told me what had happened: The horse had reared up and I’d kicked myself out of the saddle, floated next to his head, grabbed him by the neck, and thrown him on his back.

I bent over laughing. I wasn't exactly the horse-throwing type, I assured them. But I couldn't remember what had happened. All I knew was I mounted the horse, then I was standing up, the horse was on his back in the dust, and Stanford was shouting.

I leaned on the fence, waiting for them to tell me they were kidding and let me in on what really happened. They didn't. "Get back on him," said Stanford.

I did.

He suggested I lie down on the stallion's back with my head on his rump, and I did it, even though when I'd seen it done earlier in the day, I swore I'd never do it in a million years. A few minutes later, I rode the stallion around the ring as slowly as if we were crossing a pond of glue.

After I let the stallion go in the holding corral, I walked over to the teepee and sank to its floor, feeling the strength drain from my body. About an hour later, I heard the whir of Stanford's wheelchair outside the teepee.

"Your horse needs to be petted around and reassured some," he said.

The horse. My horse. Feeling sheepish, I labored to my feet and went to the corral. The stallion's head hung. His eyes stared dully. He looked exactly the way I felt. Only then did I realize how exhausted he was, how terrified he'd been. He hadn't been trying to hurt me; he just hadn't known what I was doing, so he'd tried every trick he had to get me to leave him alone. But I'd been too afraid, and then too detached, to recognize that he had any emotional life at all. Now my heart fairly cramped with love. I brushed him and hugged him and petted him.

Jeannie joined me, and together we stroked the little black stallion back to life. I joked that the horse reminded me of other studs I'd encountered in life—when the going got rough, I got scared and didn't realize until later that they were scared, too. Oh, the men I wished I'd had a chance to brush back to life!

Jeannie laughed. She said she'd never seen anything like what she saw in the corral that day.

What happened? I asked her.

"These horses will bring up every fear that you ever had about everything," she said. "And Stanford can look at the fear, he can look at the courage that sits there behind the fear."

I could easily recall my fears: I was scared of ridicule and pity; I was scared of being disrespected by horses and little boys on fences; I was scared of being pounded to death by eggbeater hooves; I was scared of having my kneecap blasted sideways in a collision with a corral pole. I was scared of being a weak, out-of-shape, no-longer-young woman. I wanted everyone to think of me as strong and brave—the stallion, the onlookers, Stanford.

As for the courage that sat behind all that fear, that had eluded me. I'd gone into some zombie fugue state and missed the fact that I had knocked the horse down in the dirt. All I could remember was that Stanford never once ran out of patience or pushed or criticized. Later, he told me he'd spent a good amount of time praying for the horse and me. His gentleness was so foreign to my system that it took me a while to figure out what it was. And he wasn't gentle only with me and the stallion. He was gentle with the dogs, the children, and the other spectators.

The thing Stanford said that weekend that stuck in my mind most was something he called out to his 4-year-old grandnephew, A.J. The little boy was trotting around among horses whose knees nearly came up to his butt. Most uncles would either not see A.J. weaving among the giant creatures, or start yelling at the sight.

"Hey, A.J., be careful," Stanford called gently. "Those horses are huge, and you're real tiny."

Stanford gentled us. All of us. He gentled us along.

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